

## **OWO MASSACRE: THE DEPRAVITY THAT HAS GRIPPED NIGERIA**

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I am almost shut out of mainstream media and social media on Sundays because of my pastoral commitments. Most Sundays are usually for me, busy and thrilling days, as I would have to celebrate the Holy Mass at three different churches. More relishing about my Sundays is the feeling I get when en route the last - travelled-to Church for the day. The journey is specially tranquilizing because it gives me a sense of being a missionary. It is also for me a time to feel the warmth of nature as my 'okada' billows and perforates hewn rocks perching on the rugged road; you could feel the touch of the freshly oozing breeze from moist vegetation; farmers making their way to their day's business - children and parents greeting and waving to extend their pleasantries to me and my rider. It also affords me the opportunity to complete my exercise ring for the day. I really do on this day enjoy my apple device that notifies me

of this result every time at the same spot on my return trip. All these beautiful memories of my Sundays turned sour on this particular Sunday of the descent of the Holy Spirit on the 5<sup>th</sup> day of June, 2022, as I came to the rectory and fingered my phone. I began to notice an avalanche of yahrzeit candles being displayed on WhatsApp status and other social media platforms timelines expressing heartfelt condolences to Catholic Diocese of Ondo and the entire people of Owo community on the massacre at the Saint Francis Xavier Catholic Church, Owa-Luwa, Owo, Ondo State, Nigeria.

It was on the solemnity of Pentecost and the faithful had been dismissed when men of the under- world attacked parishioners of St. Francis Catholic Church, Owo, who detonated explosives and sporadically rained bullets into the church from different angles leaving scores of parishioners dead and many badly wounded and the church desecrated. This heinous and ghastly terrorist attack is the worst in recent time in Nigeria's terrorism index. It was a horrific attack, no one was spared,

even infants were killed and many bore the excruciating pangs of bullet wounds. The story of the two-year- old Winifred particularly invokes so much pain - the grandmother and his teenage brother were shot dead while he and his mother got shot and are hospitalized. Imagine the tender skin of a two- year-old child hit by bullets from Kalashnikov; imagine the devastating effect of this experience in the life of this child as he grows to maturity. The same goes to everyone who was caught in the scene of the massacre; imagine the pain they would bear having their bodies riddled with bullets. The vestiges of this devilish and barbaric attack would linger for a long time in the parish community of St Francis Xavier Catholic Church and the entire people of Owo community.

The world is fast becoming a theatre of gun deaths, where schizophrenic entities pick up arms to wreak havoc. This trend is surging again especially in the USA with the recent Uvalde and other shootings. However, Nigeria's case is more than some mentally deranged felons clouded by racist rainbow. Nigeria is faced with real terrorism occasioned

by the presence of Boko Haram, ISWAP, Marauding Fulani Herdsmen, ESN, and some pockets of bandits. These groups are alleged to be responsible for the orchestration of the so many insecurity palava Nigeria is battling with. The Owo massacre is simply an act of terrorism against the Nigerian state and South westerners in particular. According to John Philips Jenkins, "terrorism is the calculated use of violence to create a general climate of fear in a population and thereby bring about a particular political objective." Invariably, this malicious act was not carried out primary as war against the church or Christians. It was purely to invoke shivers on the Nigerian state and the Yoruba nation perhaps for political cum economic reasons. Some opinions on the reason for this attack might just be true. One of such opinions is that the governor of Ondo State has unequivocally shown his disinterestedness in allowing open grazing and carving out Yoruba ancestral lands for cattle colonies. Rotimi Akeredolu has also been a very important figure in the emergence and sustainability of the Yoruba security architecture- amotekun. He is also very vocal about the rotational presidency and strongly believes that

the next president should be a southerner and not from the North, especially a Fulani man. Besides, some people have opined that Ondo State is home to many mineral resources and that there might be some conflicting interest on who gets to control these mineral deposits.

These realities no doubt are capable of being behind the reasons for attacking the Catholic Church at Owa-Luwa. Based on this analysis the worshipping church community only became a very soft target. Thus for their vile action to garner popularity and sell easily the fear they want to instill, they chose, perhaps a universally known and maybe the most aesthetical church around Owo. Indeed, this was achieved as the news of this attack as enjoyed global knowledge. The Owo Massacre has heighten the fear Nigerians live in today. Nigerians live in precarious times and people's lives are on high risk. Little wonder then the atrocity alert index of April 6, 2022, ranked Nigeria with Ukraine and Venezuela where people's lives are at a high risk ratio. This rating obviously fits Nigeria because of the plethora of atrocities that have become the order

of the day in Nigeria especially aggravated since the inception of the present government. We reminiscence the killing of about eighty- seven Nigerians in Benue on New Year Day in 2018; the killing of the 110 farmers in Zabarmari, Borno on November 29,2020; the 30 people shot and burnt to death in their bus who were going to the market in Gidan Bawa, Sokoto on December 7,2021; those who were killed by bandits, about 60 Nigerians in Bukkuyum and Anka local government areas of Zamfara on January 7, 2022; those kidnaped in the recent Abuja-Kaduna train bombing on March 28,2022; and a host of other Nigerians who die every day without public knowledge from the hands of mischievous elements parading themselves in Nigeria today as agitators and terrorists. These and other small scale criminalities like armed robbery and cultism leave nothing to be desired about Nigeria.

The question that seems to beg the answer is - who are those responsible for the Owo Massacre? According to the governor of Ondo State, Rotimi Akeredolu, foreigners from Mali trained in Libya are the ones behind the

massacre at Owo. The governor is an insider in this present government and there is a lot left unsaid on this matter. However, if there is anything to go by from is allegation, these foreigners are trained Fulani militias alleged to have been imported to Nigeria for some political reasons. There is suspicion that the threat by certain presidential 'candidates' of blood bath if the 2015 elections outcome was not in their favour was predicated upon this Malian militias. Just after the allegation made by the state governor, the federal government through her minister of interior, Rauf Aregbesola, announced that ISWAP, Islamic State of West Africa Province, is behind the attack on Saint Francis Church. These are mere speculations that do not provide solutions to the big issue at hand. A country where terrorists can invade and their identity is not known and nothing is done says so much about high level of ineptitude and colossal security negligence by the government. It is not enough to guess the attackers, it is very expedient that the government at the various levels hunt down these criminals and prosecute them.

Nigeria is ravaged by hydro-headed insecurity; from the North East to the South East, terrorists have defiled state security apparatus and have successfully plunder and spilled innocent blood. The only reason this government is helpless may be that it is sympathetic to the plights of these terrorists or at best they (terrorists) work hand- in- glove with some key players in the Buhari APC led administration. The government of any given country has as its primary duty to secure the life and property of its citizenry. At any given time when any government fails to guarantee the security of its people such a government should honorably resign. This is so because a government that cannot guarantee the safety of the people it is put in place to serve should be done away with because it has failed. The British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson narrowly pulled through the vote of no confidence passed on him by members of the parliament because of issues not nearing the ones we face in Nigeria. In fact, quoting one of the presidential aspirants, Mr Peter Obi, “the incidence of the Owo massacre adds up to my position that our country is fast becoming a failed state.” Peter Obi is a politician, hence he tries



to be diplomatic and to be politically correct. But for many others who are not politicians, Nigeria is indeed a failed state. There is high level of disregard for human dignity to the extent that Nigeria is littered with graves of innocent people; there is high level of inflation and unemployment that have externalized hunger, wretchedness, penury and crime. Yet the ruling political party held a convention sponsored with state money in order to elect people, who promised to continue with the legacy of the waning government, into various leadership positions in the next dispensation. Nigeria is indeed a country suffering from retrograde amnesia. Owo massacre has opened the wounds of the preposterous killings in our dear country since the Buhari led administration. This 'holocaust' must end!

The president should lead the war against terrorism in Nigeria. It is not enough to be shocked and saddened by the realities of these attacks. This government rode to power on the promise of security. The president is the Commander in Chief of the Armed forces, he determines

the actions of the military and other security Agencies under his control. Today's situation in Nigeria is one that the military and other security outfits of the nation are as complacent as the government. Many kidnap victims do not exclusively tell their stories without making allusions to collusion of security personnel. It is not enough to identify terrorists and console families and loved ones of the victims of terrorism. . It is not an achievement to disclose those behind these horror of terror, Nigerians want terrorists and all kinds of criminals apprehended and prosecuted. There are many dislodged Boko Haram members and other heinous Fulani killer herders caught in their devilish acts that have been set free without prosecution. To state indeed that the present government is reckless in handling the present security upheavals bedeviling the peace, freedom and prosperity of Nigeria is to state the obvious. If this were not so how would terrorists deploy a helicopter and attack a residential area? Like Owo, Adara community in Southerner part of Kaduna state are grieving the loss of about 32 persons from the raid of Fulani terrorists who were shooting sporadically from their helicopter aided by some of

their foot soldiers mounting on about 150 motorcycles, who destroyed a church and kidnapped about three armed persons.

This is the time for electioneering campaigns. Campaigns for the 2023 elections should focus on ideas that will ameliorate the ugly situations in Nigeria today. It is not a time to insult and blackmail opponents. Presidential hopefuls should use this opportunity to sell their ideas on how to tackle issues of rising insecurity before any other thing. The verge of the end of Buhari's administration is the best thing since sliced bread to many Nigerians who are yearning for a change from ineptitude, corruption and absenteeism. Issues that these set of electorates would want to hear are solutions to insecurity, creation and implementation of state police, increase of manpower in the armed forces, police force and the civil defense; procurement of arms and ammunition; procurement of sophisticated modern military surveillance and attack technologies; creation of employment opportunities, driving an economy that is production based, restructuring, having a plan for the continued unity of

Nigeria, respect for the rule of law, revamping the judiciary by creating opportunities for the emergence of more judges, plans for having stronger anti-corruption measure, et cetera. Trivialities like ethnicity, religion, political affiliation and even age- inasmuch the candidate health is sound - should not be considered. The electorates must exercise their franchise this time around and to do this, they must register with the Independent National Electoral Commission to be included in the register of voters. The electorates must shun any form of discouragement either by way of disinterestedness in the process or the bureaucracy of some INEC officials, not even the limited and crowded centres of registration should deter Nigerians from getting their permanent voter's card. This is the role of the electorates to eradicating terrorism, kidnaping, ritual killings, poverty and penury ravaging Nigeria today. Nigeria future is indeed in hands of the electorates! Let us do this for the souls massacred at Owo and everywhere in Nigeria since the inception of Buhari's government. May the souls of all those massacred at Saint Francis Xavier Catholic Church, Owa- Luwa, Owo, Ondo State and

the souls of all the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in perfect peace, Amen!